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Week of
September 7, 1942

Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

1942

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of September 7, 1942.*
†"I Killed the Count" opened Thursday, September 3rd, at the Cort Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN

Place this week's reviews with preceding weekly reviews so as to have always an up to date file of the New York Stage.

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"I Killed the Count"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
September 4, 1942

Everyone Commits The Same Murder

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

WHEN the curtain rose, the Count was already very much dead in his chair. In no time Inspector Davidson jogged over from Scotland Yard and began having a go at all the people who lived in the Count's flat, as well as the liftmen and the maid, the American who had tried to call on the Count, and the lord who had invited him to dinner. Quite a collection of possible suspects, and quite a time it took, too, to make clear who they were, what they did, and at just what time they had come home the previous night.

Then, toward the middle of the second act, when everybody was present and unaccounted for, the confessions started to fly like snowflakes. "I Killed the Count," shouted this one. "I Killed the Count," screamed that one. "I Killed the Count," insisted the other one. And each time there was a flashback showing when, explaining how, and telling why he did it. The Count, indeed, had been waited on at 15-minute intervals, like a busy dentist.

It was all pretty confusing to the Inspector, though of course the audience knew that any confession made in a mystery play before 10:45 p.m. is just so much sand thrown in its eye. But it did get a twist it didn't expect along about 10:40, and then the Real Story came out, and the curtain appropriately came down.

Once it really starts to move, *I Killed the Count* is a fairly diverting, though never very exciting, yarn, with a third-act surprise that is neat, but not gory. The whole play is carefully put together, and somehow should stack up better than it does. Perhaps one reason it lacked any real punch is that it's *too* carefully put together. It's so methodical that it's never very mysterious, and it repeats the same pattern—flashbacks and all—too many times. Another reason is that it's written half straight and half humorously, a bad combination, because you can't take it quite seriously and yet never find it really funny. Finally, most of the dialogue just misses and so does most of the acting. It's something you never have very strong feelings about; and murder, of all things, shouldn't be wishy-washy.

Louis Hector, Guy Spaull and A. J. Herbert are adequate in straight roles, and Ethel Morrison makes her presence felt as a Cockney maid. But the best performance is provided by Clarence Derwent, who also has the best part.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
September 4, 1942

The Count Is Dead

By HOWARD BARNES

THE new theatrical season received little stimulation from last evening's exhibit at the Cort. "I Killed the Count," as you may have guessed, is a murder mystery. As such, it might have proved a pleasantly chilling reminder that magic can be wrought behind footlights. Homicidal melodrama has turned this trick more than once in recent years. Unfortunately this particular shocker sets a fresh period of stage doings right back to scratch, if not somewhat behind that point.

• • •

For "I Killed the Count" is pretentiously tricky in conception and exceedingly inept in execution. The idea of having four different individuals confess to the same killing may have seemed like a honey of a theme to Alec Coppel when he first took pen in hand. It leads to what were obviously supposed to be antic complications as a Scotland Yard inspector snaps: "This is getting ridiculous." The catch is that the play itself and not its plot complications deserve the inspector's adjective.

It is difficult to see why authors, producers, directors and players concern themselves with such clumsy trifles as this new stage offering at a time when the theatre is in urgent need of good plays, or at least good showmanship. There are fancy trimmings in "I Killed the Count," such as having various murder confessions reconstructed in the flash-back device employed so much more effectively by the screen. There are several stalwart performances in the show. By and large, it is spurious stagecraft.

Even the normal suspense and excitement that one might have expected from a shooting done not once but several times is lacking in the production. The characters are completely two-dimensional and the staging is repetitive. After the third person has admitted that he knocked off an Italian rat called Count Victor Mattoni, you are likely to care very little whether Scotland Yard solves the mystery or not. The last act gives away the secret, of course, but by that time it wouldn't have made much difference who killed the count.

• • •

The acting is sometimes excellent. There is a nice comic bit by Clarence Derwent, as a bedeviled witness in the murder investigation. Louis Hector does what he can with the too heavy role of the inspector and Doris Dalton has a rather effective scene of restrained hysterics in supplying the clew to the homicidal puzzle. No amount of acting could have lifted the work out of its deep rut of conventional melodramatics. This season needs good playwriting or good showmanship. "I Killed the Count" has neither.

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CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS
235 East 22nd Street
New York, N. Y.

"I Killed the Count"

NEW YORK SUN
September 4, 1942

'I Killed the Count,' a Mystery, Opens at The Cort Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

ALMOST any mystery writer would be tickled to find himself possessed of the plot which Alec Coppel has invented for "I Killed the Count," a small study in violence which opened at the Cort Theater last evening. Mr. Coppel's skulduggery, when he gets around to it, is ingenious and confusing. It ties Scotland Yard up in knots and leaves it there and that, as all fans know, takes considerable doing.

Unfortunately, the problem of getting this plot into a play and on the stage has also entangled Mr. Coppel, who spends most of the evening proving that stories are easier to think up than to tell. The result is a play which not even ingenuity can make more than occasionally interesting; a play mired in heavy dialogue, bogged down in its own obvious intricacies. Although it gets better as it proceeds—an almost inevitable progression, considering its first act—"I Killed the Count" is heavy-footed to the end and more often tedious than amusing.

It is concerned with the violent death of Count Victor Mattoni, a man whose diverse misdeeds make him an almost inevitable victim. He is found shot in his easy chair by the comic chambermaid; he is surrounded by people who got home late that night and cannot prove they were somewhere else between 12 and 1. (Mr. Coppel, unsparingly thorough in such matters, gives one and all an opportunity to testify, thus making his first act very hard to sit through.) A viscount may have killed him, a liftman is suspect, two young women may be doubted, and a visiting American is as likely a criminal as another. And perhaps you may know that, before the end, the baffled inspector of police has four confessions to one murder and a fifth confession to another, although this last is merely put in to make it harder—and to provide a curtain line.

There are amusing moments and many flashbacks and some puzzlement. But the author's inventiveness has stopped with his central device; his crime is engaging but his play is dull. And Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan, who collaborated on the direction, have helped matters little, arranging to have almost everything done in the most obvious fashion. Louis Hector is emphatic as the inspector, Doris Dalton languishing as one suspect and Ruth Holden anxiously pert as another. Clarence Derwent is amusing on every opportunity. But most of the acting is notable for willingness rather than for good judgment.

'I KILLED THE COUNT'

A play in three acts by Alec Coppel; settings by Emil Holak; directed and produced at the Cort Theater on September 3, 1942, by Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan. The cast:

Count Victor Mattoni.....Rafael Corio
Polly.....Ethel Morrison
Divisional Inspector Davidson.....Louis Hector
Detective Raines.....Bertram Tanswell
Martin.....Le Roi Operti
Police Constable Clifton....James Ganon
Louise Rogers.....Doris Dalton
Renee La Lune.....Ruth Holden
Samuel Diamond.....Clarence Derwent
Johnson.....Edgar Kent
Mullet.....A. J. Herbert
Bernard K. Froy.....Robert Allen
Viscount Sorrington.....Guy Spaull

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
September 4, 1942

"I Killed the Count" Murder Mystery From Comedy Angle

"I Killed the Count," comedy by Alec Coppel. Produced by Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan at the Cort Theatre, New York, Sept. 3, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

WE STARTED to build a new theatre season at the Cort Theatre last night on a familiar theatre premise: That a bad murder play becomes a good murder play if you make it sufficiently ridiculous to create laughter. "I Killed the Count" is the sample offered.

As entertainment it is strained and tiresome for half its length. Then it picks up a fair bit of speed by extracting confessions from three persons that each of them is responsible for the death of a man found in the prologue with a bullet wound in his head.

The fact that from evidence presented in three flashbacks of the murder it was quite plain the victim had been shot each time in the stomach and not the head added something to the mystery, but not much.

"I Killed the Count" came originally from England, having been produced by Reginald Tate in London in 1937. Over here it has been a favorite with university and community theatres since 1939, reaching the Paper Mill Playhouse in Milburn, N. J., two years ago.

Frank Carrington and Agnes Morgan, who made the Milburn production, there decided that it was worth a Broadway trial. Lee Shubert agreed to go half way with them, and here it is.

The story is given over mostly to the investigations of one of those Scotland Yard inspectors who brings in the suspects one at a time and puts them roughly through the usual preliminary examination.

"Where were you at 12 o'clock last night?"

"Me, sir?"

"Yes, you!"

"Why, sir, I was goin' about my business as usual, sir."

And so on far into the night. Near closing time the suspects are lined up and the final and complete version of the crime is related.

It is only when the story told is actually holding, or when the performances given are definitely startling, that this sort of play is worth the higher tariff of the theatre. They are good dollar shows but seldom worth three dollars.

Good Cast

The producers of "I Killed the Count" have played fair in the matter of the cast, which is well chosen and expert. Louis Hector is the inspector, and Louis dates back to the days when Scotland Yard was way up town. He can do the job without a hat, even indoors, and that demands a bit of thinking.

Clarence Derwent, playing a pestered witness, has a chance to gather most of the laughs, and that pleased both Mr. Derwent and the audience.

Two accused character veterans, A. J. Herbert and Edgar Kent, are helpful. Ruth Holden adds a comedy line and Doris Dalton does her best to be becomingly emotional.

The setting by Emil Holak is solid and serviceable. "I Killed the Count" therefore adds up to average theatre. It deserves, I think, the two-star-plus rating that in our traffic system advises the play-goer to "Proceed With Caution."

NEW YORK TIMES
September 4, 1942

Alec Coppel's Mystery Drama, 'I Killed the Count,' Opens at the Cort

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ALTHOUGH the theatre has been having a protracted recess it has not got all the torpor out of its system yet. Quite a lot of it turns up in Alec Coppel's "I Killed the Count," which was acted on a competitive basis at the Cort last evening. Mr. Coppel's play is an English crime mystery that was produced in London in the appeasement era of 1937 and has been produced here and there in the United States by people who no doubt were well-meaning. For two years Broadway has resisted it, although it got as close as the Paper Mill Playhouse in Milburn, N. J., and once sneaked into an amateur theatre that was too near by for comfort. Now it is here, and the new season is up to its ankles in mediocrity already.

* * *

Plays like "I Killed the Count" are not written but dashed off. Mr. Coppel might have finished this one before tea on scraps of paper found in his dressing-gown pockets. There are the ill-tempered Scotland Yard inspector, his bungling adolescent apprentice, the comic Cockney room servant, the odious foreign count and the disdainful English count, the vulgar American show girl, the lady of gentle birth who is afflicted with the vapors and other characters out of stock. Mr. Coppel goes about the writing job as if he were making out a laundry list. The organization of the play is routine. The dialogue is commonplace. The plot would be suitable for a clever charade of bored weekend guests who have read all the crime fiction on their bedside tables.

* * *

Since Mr. Coppel tries to handle his characters separately, every scene is like a vaudeville turn. Actors are whisked in and out as if they were tied on the end of a piece of string. The principal exception is Louis Hector, the inspector, who is on stage nearly every moment—smoking a crafty pipe when the curtain goes up, but working up to a primitive bellow as the evening thickens. There is enough form in his character development for a regiment of Wacs.

Never having more than a couple of minutes on stage at a time, the other actors have to perform in a series of explosions. Their individual scenes go off like firecrackers. Since the play is written that way, it would no doubt be unmannerly to blame the actors. But it is nevertheless distressing to have to see them behaving that way.